The United States has embarked on an imperial adventure in the Middle East. This is the true meaning of the war against Iraq. The war is not about the disarmament of Iraq. That was always a hollow and cynical pretext.

No one with any real knowledge of the situation believed that Iraq, on its knees from two disastrous wars and from 12 years of punitive sanctions, presented any sort of "imminent threat" to anyone.

In any event, from the start last November when UN inspectors returned to Iraq under Security Council Resolution 1441, the Washington hawks wanted the inspectors to fail and then pressed impatiently for war just when inspections showed real signs of progress.

Nor is the war only, or even primarily, about toppling Saddam Hussain. Indeed the White House announced that U.S. forces would enter Iraq whether or not the Iraqi leader resigned and left the country. The war has bigger aims: it is about the implementation of a vast - and probably demented - strategic plan.

Washington is intoxicated by the vision of imposing a Pax Americana on the Arab world on the model of the imperial "order" which Britain imposed on the entire region in an earlier age - with its Gulf and South Arabian strong points protecting the route to India, its occupation of Egypt in 1882, and then the extension of its rule after the First World War to some of the Arab provinces of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The result was the creation under British tutelage of Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan.

**Bases across the region**

With bases across the region from Oman to Central Asia, America is now seeking to recreate the British Empire at its apogee. The occupation of Iraq, a major Arab country at the strategic heart of the region, will allow the United States to control the resources of the Middle East and reshape its geopolitics to its advantage - or so the Anglo-American strategists hope.

But if things go badly, history may well judge the war to be a criminal enterprise - unjustified, unprovoked, illegitimate, catastrophic for the Iraqi victims of the conflict and destructive of the rules of international relations as they have evolved over the past half century.

The fatal flaw is that this is not a purely American project. Rather it must be seen as the culmination of America's strategic partnership with Israel which began 36 years ago when, in 1967, President Charles de Gaulle told Israel that it would lose French support if it attacked its Arab neighbours.

Israel promptly switched its attentions from Europe to the U.S., which it gradually made its main external ally and subsidiser. The relationship has since grown more intimate with every passing year, to the extent that the tail now wags the dog.

Much of the ideological justification and political pressure for war against Iraq has come from right-wing American Zionists, many of them Jews, closely allied to Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and occupying influential positions both inside and outside the Bush administration. It is neither exaggeration, nor anti-Semitism, as they would have it, to say that this is a Bush-Sharon war against Iraq.

As is now widely understood, the genesis of the idea of occupying Iraq can be dated back to the mid-1990s. Richard Perle, chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Policy Board and often described as the intellectual driving force behind President Bush's world-view, has for years been pressing U.S. and Israeli leaders to go to war against Iraq.

On July 8, 1996, shortly after Benyamin Netanyahu's election victory over Shimon Peres, Perle handed Netanyahu a strategy paper entitled A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm. It called for the removal of Saddam Hussain as a key Israeli objective and as a means of weakening Syria.

The call for an attack on Iraq was then taken up in 1997 by a right-wing American group called The Project for a New American Century (PNAC), whose members included Richard Perle; Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz; Eliot Abrams, Middle East director of Bush's National Security Council; Randy Scheunemann, President of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq; and two influential conservative editors, William Kristol of the Weekly Standard and Norman Podhoretz of Commentary.

With friends such as Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfled and Vice-President Dick Cheney, and backed by half a dozen right-wing think-tanks, this group formed a formidable pressure group.

The terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001 gave these advocates of American empire and of the U.S.-Israeli alliance their chance. They were able to make the inexperienced President George W. Bush, who came to power after a questionable election, the vehicle for their agenda.

The result is the war we are now witnessing. The ultimate objective is to change the map of the Middle East by destroying or intimidating all the enemies of the US and Israel. If America's imperium turns out to be benevolent, which is most improbable, the Arabs may accept it for a while. But they will always resist Israel's domination of their region. That is the

flaw in the project.

**Spoken passionately**

Britain's Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair is a strange bedfellow of these right-wing ideologues. He has spoken passionately not only of the need to "disarm Iraq" but also of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestine conflict. He has castigated France for opposing the war and of thereby allegedly missing the chance of promoting Arab-Israeli peace. This is contorted and unconvincing logic.

Blair knows that Sharon, who has rubbished the Quartet's "road-map" and has devoted his life to the achievement of a "Greater Israel", has no intention of allowing the emergence of a viable Palestinian state.

On the contrary, he is using the crisis to continue his wholesale destruction of Palestinian society. Blair has not commented on the 80 Palestinians Israel has killed, and the hundreds it has wounded, in the first 18 days of this month, nor has he spoken of the 48,000 Palestinian houses damaged or destroyed in the past 30 months. Blair has squandered a great deal of his integrity in order to protect Britain's so-called "special relationship" with Washington.

But if, after the war, attention turns to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he will find that Sharon has more influence in the American capital than he has - in spite of the 45,000 British troops he has committed to battle.

As evidence of this influence, neither the White House nor the State Department has chosen to protest at the death of a young American peace activist, Rachel Corrie, crushed by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza this week as she tried to stop the demolition of a Palestinian home.

The United States is counting on a swift, successful, relatively "clean" war in Iraq, in which American troops will be seen as liberators not occupiers.

It intends to buy goodwill by embarking immediately on a programme of reconstruction of roads, power plants, hospitals, schools and so forth. But who will pay for this reconstruction? Will it be money drawn from Iraq's oil revenues?

In particular, will American companies, who intend to secure the lion's share of the contracts, be paid out of the UN escrow account established under the oil-for-food programme? This will require a new Security Council Resolution. If France, Russia and China are cut out of the reconstruction contracts and the oil concessions, they will undoubtedly fight any such American monopoly. Some Western diplomats see this as the next diplomatic

battle.

In this war, the great unanswered question is whether American and British troops will meet any serious resistance, not just from the élite units of the Iraqi army but also from the civilian population.

After the first flush of victory, will the occupying armies be harassed by hit-and-run guerrillas, as happened to Israel after its invasion of Lebanon in 1982? Will an Iraqi "Hezbollah" emerge on the model of the resistance movement which eventually drove Israel out of south Lebanon? A successful resistance movement needs outside support, a flow of arms and money, safe havens when the going gets tough.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah had such support from Syria and Iran. In 1983, it was Syria and its local allies that managed to defeat American attempts, brokered by George Shultz, then U.S. Secretary of State, to draw Lebanon into Israel's sphere of influence. Who in the region today could extend help to an Iraqi resistance movement?

Syria has become too vulnerable to play any such role, Iran too fearful of being the next target, Turkey too preoccupied in keeping a lid on Kurdish aspirations to statehood in northern Iraq.

The most likely resistance might come from elsewhere. A non-state actor like Osama bin Laden's Al Qaida, drawing inspiration and recruits from the violent anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiments now sweeping the Muslim world, might take up the challenge. Occupation breeds insurrection. This is an axiom of history.

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